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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Co-chairs statement on JVP
provokes divided response in Sri Lankan media

REFS: Colombo 1997

1. (U) SUMMARY: The December 15 statement by the Tokyo donors conference co-chairs on the JVP's agitation against Norway and the peace process provoked a widespread and sharply divided response from the Sri Lankan media. Independent English and Tamil media covered the story factually with favorable editorials, while government-run and Sinhala media outlets gave the statement somewhat less prominence and less favorable editorial response. Coverage of the statement, however, served to reinforce among the public the co-chairs' support for the peace process and concern over the lack of cohesion within the GSL. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) The December 15 statement (see Reftel) by the co-chairs of the Tokyo donors conference received widespread coverage in all electronic media outlets, with both state-run and independent broadcasters making it their lead story in all three local languages. Radio broadcasters also gave the statement prominent coverage in their noon and evening news broadcasts December 15, as did several Internet sites independent website Lanka Academic noted that the "co-chairs had told the President to bring her Marxist ally to heel," whereas pro-Tiger website TamilNet reproduced the statement verbatim without editorial comment).

3. (U) Both the English and vernacular print media also featured the statement prominently in their December 16 dailies. Independent English Daily Mirror bannered (12/16): "JVP action shocks donors." Independent English daily Island (12/16), normally sympathetic to JVP positions, headlined "U.S., EU, Japan lambaste JVP for opposing peace process; JVP dismisses allegation." Coverage of the statement and the JVP response carried into the weekend, with the independent Sunday Leader (12/19) carrying news of the statement in an editorial titled "Madam, your slip is showing," which included the statement "...If Kumaratunga is engulfed by a passionate obsession of any kind, it is only to stay in power for the rest of her life." On the other hand, the independent Sinhala Sunday Divaina editorial (12/19) titled "We are also bewildered at that bewilderment" took a sharply negative view of the statement and questioned why the co-chairs had not seen fit to criticize the LTTE for their ceasefire violations in the same way they had criticized the JVP.

4. (U) COMMENT: Perhaps revealing the fragile state of the peace process, the media reacted forcefully and prominently to the co-chairs' statement, lining up along predictable sides. The JVP's response to the Ambassador, which the party released to the press, took him to task for not criticizing the LTTE in the statement. We expect that the Ambassador's response to the JVP, in which he reminded them that the U.S. had on many occasions publicly denounced LTTE actions, will also find its way into the media. END COMMENT

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